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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this presentation was to: (1) describe the history of women's music in the United States; (2) define women's music; (3) report on the status of the large women's recording companies; and (4) focus on a recent controversy in the women's music industry involving the desire for political purity versus the need for economic security. The formation of women's music in the United States resulted from a rise in political awareness of women in the lesbian-feminist subculture, the limited number of roles offered women in mainstream music activities, and growth of the number of lesbians, who sought artistic affirmation of their lifestyle. This document defines women's music as an art form that is composed by, for, and about women, as well as economically controlled by women. The two major women's music labels, Olivia Records and Redwood Records, have existed for 12 years and were created and sustained by a few performers' popularity. Olivia Records, which began as a political organization, is currently not as politically motivated and has a commercial orientation. Redwood Records has resisted commercialization, has a political orientation, and resists mainstream recording pressures through an emphasis on unique organizational structures, sound, and audiences. As a result, this recording company has become both politically and economically successful. (JHP)

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Women's Music in the United States

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My intention in this presentation is to relate the history of women's music in the United States, define women's music, discuss the two largest women's music labels (Olivia Records and Redwood Records) and then focus on Redwood Records and its position within one of the biggest controversy in the women's music industry; the desire for political purity versus the need for economic security...all in twenty minutes.

The formation of women's music in the United States resulted from the rise in political awareness of women in the lesbian-feminist subculture, the limited roles offered women in mainstream music and the growth in the number of lesbians who sought artistic affirmation of their chosen lifestyle.

The first public appearance of women's music began in a gay bar in L.A. when a lesbian folk singer, Maxine Feldman, stunned her audience by adding a new song to her repertiore. "Angry Atthis" was the first song with explicitly lesbian lyrics, performed by an "out" artist.

The bar owner chastised Feldman for making "people think and not drink and that's not what gay entertainment is all about." Within the year, 1969, "Angry Atthis" was recorded as a 45 and became the first lesbian song produced by a lesbian controlled company.

(Musical segment of Angry Atthis)

Three years later Alix Dobkin, a lesbian separatist, formed a musical group called Lavendar Jane. Once Dobkin located a lesbian sound engineer, Lavendar Jane's first album was released entitled, Lavendar Jane Loves Women. One thousand copies sold within three months without a formal distribution system.

Although there were other scattered recording efforts, the first organized women's music label wasn't started until 1973 . A lesbian collective formed the first label, Olivia, in order to spread the lesbian-feminist message and subcultural experience to more lesbians. Olivia was formed more as a political move than a profit making adventure. Their first attempt was a 45 with two artists recorded on it: Meg Christian and Cris Williamson. Although the musical style was still predominantly folk, the focus was on strong independent women, equal relationships and "coming out." Olivia's first 45 also added a little humor to its style with a song called, "Ode to a Gym Teacher."

(Second Musical segment)

Although the Olivia collective had little experience in formal record production or distribution, Christian's "Ode to a Gym Teacher" quickly sold out and provided funds for Olivia's first full album, Christian's I Know You Know. After its release Olivia recognized, as had Feldman and Dobkin, that there was a need for a distribution system for women's music. Olivia started to ask for volunteers from their audience at the end of Christian's concerts. Becoming a distributor for Olivia was purely political, part time work but since the whole industry (labels and performers) were politically motivated, no one expected to make money.

In the next few years though, more women's music labels were formed and the distributors sought to distribute these new artists as well. Olivia, in direct contradiction to their stated political goals, rejected this inclusion. The distributors broke

from Olivia and formed WILD (Women's Independent Label Distributors), and began distributing all women's music. Many distributors were also local producers of women's music concerts, seeking locations, sound systems, crews and lodging for performers. Local producers became an integral part of the women's music industry, spreading the music and lesbian-feminist message into more remote areas of the country.

By 1974, the first national music festival was produced, bringing various women's music performers together for the first time to sing for a very large gathering of lesbians. Presently, there are 20 festivals per year in the United States, over 100 production companies, 15 women's music distributors, 100 performers playing in 80 coffeehouses, clubs and bars. Over 38 labels now produce albums which are sold through the WILD system to feminist and alternative bookstores.

Women's music, itself, is defined as music for, by and about women as well as economically controlled by women. This form of music has been called a variety of names: lesbian music (for the audience it tries to reach); woman-identified music (based on the first political position paper on lesbianism); womansong (by the artists) and finally the name which has survived, women's music. There are various reasons why this name has continued to be used. First, the name is less threatening to the dominant social order. Those involved in the music (artists and audience) are less likely to be harassed for listening or performing women's music than lesbian music. In addition, advertisements for concerts are more acceptable to various media when the term, women's music is used. Lastly, acknowledgement of what women's music is has

become a password into the lesbian-feminist community.

Presently there are two major women's music labels in the United States: Olivia Records and Redwood Records. Both have existed for 12 years and each was created and sustained by the popularity of one or two performers. Olivia was based on the music of Meg Christian and Cris Williamson. Redwood Records is based on the music of Holly Near.

Redwood Records

Holly Near is an excellent example of a musician/political worker brought up through the ranks of the 1960s left movement and then into the lesbian-feminist subculture. Her parents were union organizers and Near's interest and direction in political music was not surprising given their influence as well as the influence of the artists she litened to (Odetta, Ronnie Gilbert). Near did not follow the traditional musical roles (chirpie, girl group member, etc.) of the 1960s offered her by mainstream music. Instead she toured with anti-war groups and started her own record company to promote her music. Her first three albums were recorded on her own label, Redwood and were distributed via mail order from her parent's home in Ukiah, California. (Slide 1) Started in 1973, Redwood was always a reflection of Near's interest (Slide 2). Her work with the anti-war movement was obvious in her albums and the musicians with whom she worked. When Near became involved in the lesbian-feminist movement, her image, music and structure of her company all radically changed. Her image went from folk madonna to lesbian-separatist (Slide 3). The songs within her new album Imagine My Surprise were

considered some of the best lesbian songs, both musically and lyrically, of the time.

(Musical segment three)

She began to work with only lesbian musicians and the structure of her company changed to a woman-controlled, woman-only recording label. Although the resulting album from this change, Imagine My Surprise was considered successful, Redwood Records, like other alternative organizations of the 1970s, sunk deep into debt.

By 1979, Near decided to get out of the business end of women's music and concentrate primarily on her music but two women's music producer/distributors approached her and offered to buy into Redwood, run all the business aspects of Redwood and leave Near to her music. This partnership resulted in a total change in organizational structure, Near's image and six albums in six years. (Slide 4)

Presently, Redwood Records is a relatively horizontal organization with each partner controlling a specific area of Redwood. Decisions are made by all three partner/owners with staff imput. This structure is a big change from the former all woman collective type structure of the mids 1970s although some of the characteristics of alternative structure still exists. Near's success as the primary performer of Redwood does not allow her special privelege or star status. There is an air of demystification and informality is the ru despite Redwood's status as the second largest women's music label in the United States. However, although some power relationships have been

worked out, others persist. All three owners are extremely powerful personalities and although they do much to eliminate status and power inequalities, their very existence seem to affect staff members.

The staff itself consists of 7 women and the motives for working at Redwood Records reflects well the split which is dividing the women's music industry as a whole...politics or profit. The majority of the staff are former producers, distributors or retailers of women's music. Politics is their prime motive for working in the industry but over the years economic security has become important. Many have experienced mismanaged women's music organizations and realize the devastating and crippling effects. They want to keep the political aspects but also keep up a business type atmosphere to gain efficiency, organization and some structure.

Outside Redwood Records, though, the audience and critics of women's music are more likely to question Redwood's motives. Many feel that both Olivia and Redwood are becoming more motivated by profit. As the women's music industry has become larger and more artists record albums, the market has become saturated. Olivia has become particularly outspoken about their interest in a mainstream distribution system, mainstream media and mainstream audience. Olivia's original goals have changed drastically. Collective structure has been replaced by hierarchy, the music has become politically soft and aimed more toward more mainstream tastes. Olivia has responded to market saturation in one way, Redwood has responded in another. Unlike Olivia, Redwood is not willing to leave the WILD network and have

been trying to figure out ways in which to reinforce WILD if Olivia leaves the system. Redwood has also tried to troubleshoot the problems between local producers and distributors.

But Redwood's prime alternative to market saturation has been coalition. When Near moved from anti-war songs to lesbian feminist songs, she still kept many of her anti-war fans. In the past four years, she has continued this political coalition building by adding anti-nuclear activists, old left members and international cultural workers to lesbian-feminists and anti-war activists. The political market has been expanded and with it, the audience for Near's music. One the one hand, the increased audience insures a more complete distribution of her political message.

On the other hand, this increase also insures economic stability through the sale of concert tickets, albums and tapes. Near tries through her music and political work, to make coalition groups see their common problems and not their differences. This is a risky economic position. Near may lose her loyal fans by trying to get them to work with other groups. Some lesbian-feminists, for example, fear that one of "their" performers will forsake lesbian-feminism for another political activity. They are afraid to find themselves among other political factions which feel that their lesbianism will scare away more conservative members of the coalition. Of course, if many lesbian-feminists felt Near was insincere or abandoning them, their only recourse would be to stop buying her albums, attending her concerts, and volunteering their time for her

political work. This could have devastating effects economically on Redwood. Instead of building a broader movement and audience, Near would be eliminating a loyal sector.

Yet if Redwood merely wanted to increase sales, Near could water down her message, sing more mainstream songs, appeal to the commercial audience and follow Olivia's path. Near has the style, voice and sound for mass market appeal, but is unwilling. From an economic standpoint, Redwood increases sales by forming a specialized mass audience thus growing rather than stagnating as the women's music market becomes saturated.

There is a fine balance between politics and economics in the operation of Redwood Records, resulting in more exposure, economic stability, growth in audience, staff and album sales as well as maintaining a strong political base.

One way Redwood has continued its political activities is through the formation of a political arm of Redwood Records, Cultural Work, Inc (CWI). Founded in 1983, CWI produces cultural, political and educational work which would normally drain the economic reserves of Redwood Records. Near's political work often included tours which were not profitable. Previously, Redwood would sponsor these tours and either eat the losses or spend time fundraising, using other organizations as fiscal sponsors. Some of Redwood's supporters also wanted to contribute funds to Redwood but donations to Redwood were not tax deductible. Now CWI can sponsor Near's political tours, raise funds under its own name and accept tax-deductible funds from supporters. CWI gives Near, and hence Redwood, the opportunity to do pure political work without the extreme economic pressure

and drain on business resources. The two organizations, though, are closely tied.

In many ways Redwood has become a very slick recording company. They have picked up much of the commercial savvy needed to reach mainstream press and audiences. Advertising techniques, glossy press packets are part of Redwood's promotional repertoire. Yet the content of these mainstream media forms emphasize Near's political perspective on lesbian-feminism, anti-nuclear issues and anti-capitalism. Near is more than willing to perform in mainstream media in order to reach middle America but is unwilling to become part of the mainstream music industry and lose control over her music and time.

The division between politics and profit or the co-opting of a subcultural work becomes the main controversy surrounding women's music and Redwood Records. The "normal" route of changing goals and becoming more commercial has been an easier solution to economic pressures. Many researchers have concluded that this route is the only alternative. Yet Redwood Records and Olivia have chosen very different routes to deal with the same economic problems. Olivia which began as the more radical political organization, has persisted less and is quite open to commercial entry. In contrast, Redwood has tried various avenues of persisting against mainstream pressures: different organizational structures, different sounds, different audiences. Redwood, throughout, has kept original political direction set by Near twelve years ago.

Through the analysis of Redwood Records, one perceives the various pressures from the audience, retailers, producers, distributors, constraints, and internal factors with which a subcultural organization must deal. Yet Redwood has proven successful both economically and politically, has continued to grow and expand, spread its political message, hire staff, add new artists, and begin a non-profit organization. This does not mean that Redwood Records may not follow Olivia toward co-optation but only for the time being has found an alternative.

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